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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 005298

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DOE FOR OFFICE OF SCIENCE ORBACH/HARDING/VANEK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/02/2020
TAGS: [TRGY](#) [ENRG](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [FR](#) [KNUC](#)
SUBJECT: FRENCH REACTIONS TO ITER SUCCESS

REF: MARSEILLE 063

Classified By: EST COUNSELOR ROBERT W. DRY FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

1. (C) Summary: French officials are almost uniformly positive about succeeding in the negotiations to secure the south of France as the home for the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER). Despite claims - many by French science bloggers -- that French disproportionate, financing of ITER will crowd out French scientific research in non-fusion disciplines, the French government perspective is clearly to the contrary. French officials say that building ITER in the south of France will not strain the research budget, and in any event will stimulate not only fusion research, but also R&D in the advanced materials, computer, and robotics disciplines. Some suggest the Government in its enthusiasm for the project may have oversold, it. While ITER will create substantial numbers of well-paying jobs, once construction is complete new French jobs are expected to number in the hundreds, not thousands. France's principal ITER negotiator strongly welcomes the U.S. proposal to bring India into the ITER partnership, the sooner the better. End Summary.

French ITER Costs Overblown Say French Officials

2. (C) In the protracted negotiations over the site for ITER, France agreed as host for the project that it would provide an additional 10% (above its ordinary share to the EU) of total costs estimated at 10 billion euros. Back home, some French researchers balked arguing that the costly project - in a tight budgetary environment - would crowd out government-sponsored research into other just as meaningful or more meaningful scientific disciplines. EST counselor explored this question with several prominent French contacts.

Government Science Community Generally Supportive

3. (C) A senior French Research Ministry officer told EST counselor that the ITER costs France would bear were significant, but not particularly large when defrayed over the time horizon of the project. He said that the extraordinary costs to France would amount to a billion Euros over a 35-year (sic) period. Of this, the central government would provide 50% and the remainder would be borne by regional/local government in France's southern region that would directly benefit from the project. He said that, for example, the annual ITER cost to the central government would be much smaller than the budget for the new Agence Nationale de la Recherche (a recently created entity modeled on the U.S.'s NSF) that stands at 350 million Euros/annum and is to be raised to 700 Euros by 2006. He claimed that what is more important than the financial commitment is the need for the French/EU role in the project to be "exemplary," assuring that procedures developed by the six ITER partners are executed properly and the project is built on time and on budget. While he also confirmed that a national debate would take place regarding the project, he assured EST counselor the results of the debate would not alter in any way French decisions already taken on ITER.

ITER, An Excellent Model for Future Collaboration

4. (C) Other French commentators concurred. French Deputy Claude Birraux, a technologist, told EST counselor he welcomed ITER, claiming that it was an excellent project and that the ITER international partnership model might serve as the vehicle for developing other technological projects in the future, such as Generation IV reactor development. He seemed unphased regarding the additional costs of the project to France. During a recent trip to Bordeaux, EST counselor raised similar questions with the Claude Delmas, the director of the Institute of Chemistry and Condensed Matter of Bordeaux University I. Delmas considered that the highest priority for research - above and beyond even the topics for which his institute was responsible - was energy. While not

an expert in energy science, he thought it critical that the world collaborate on finding a solution to the energy dilemma, especially given climate change imperatives. In short, he felt that whatever the costs, fusion research was worthwhile.

More Fission, Not Fusion, Please

15. (C) Edouard Brezin, the president of the French Academy of Sciences, provided a lone, but strident, contrary view of ITER. In a recent meeting with NSF Europe representative and EST counselor, Brezin questioned fusion research altogether. A particle physicist himself, he saw little utility for the project in France claiming that the materials research - a part of the project,s development requirements -- will prove more valuable in the end than the fusion work itself. He claimed that ITER will be but one of many huge fusion projects required in the years ahead before any serious industrial concept can be developed for fusion-based electrical power generation. He thought that France should concentrate on what it does best: fission research. "Given the amount of money and effort we have put into fission, we should be the last country to need fusion," he said. Indeed, he thought that France should proceed "urgently" with building another fast breeder reactor system. Such a system would ease the nuclear waste disposal problem by burning plutonium. Finally, he said that ITER should not be used "as an alibi for doing nothing to benefit the climate." Nor should ITER be considered an answer to climate change. Now, is the time for measures which should be taken to address the climate, he said. "ITER,s benefits might serve the interests of our great, great, grandchildren...."

A Six-Plus (India) Partnership?

16. (C) EST counselor also spoke with Bernard Bigot, High Commissioner for Atomic Research, at CEA, essentially France,s day-to-day ITER negotiator. Regarding criticism of ITER, Bigot said it has always been in the background in France. Such discussion now resonates because the EU,s site for the project won in the negotiations and because the debate about the government,s contribution to research (centered on the so-called "Research Bill") has not been completed. Bigot claimed there will be many research spin-offs besides those in the fusion discipline, including in computer science and robotics and materials research and development. He was confident that the project can be built on time and on schedule. While aware that the U.S. had internal questions about fusion research priorities (the Boehlert Amendment), he suggested that an internal debate in the U.S. would be a useful one and he felt confident that U.S. fusion scientists would rally around ITER. Bigot was pleased to learn that the U.S. had indicated it would be supportive of India,s participation in ITER as a full partner. He had visited Indian fusion research facilities within the past year and claimed Indian research and scientists were impressive. In short, the Indians had much to offer, he said. He added that in a recent meeting between the EU and Japan in which the question of India,s membership as a full ITER partner was raised, Japan favored delaying consideration of India,s entry because it would make meeting the demanding schedule of the fall ITER agenda very difficult, if not impossible. Bigot claims he argued against this view saying that decisions will be taken regarding ITER responsibilities in the fall meetings and that Indian participation would benefit the distribution of ITER responsibilities and not unduly slow the agenda. It was not clear whether Bigot,s position reflects the EU one.

Comment

17. (C) While hardly a random sampling, EST counselor,s meetings with French officials highlighted French pride in succeeding in the difficult negotiations over the site for ITER. The success in the ITER site negotiations is in contrast to a number of recent GOF failures - the EU referendum, the 2012 Olympics bid, and the continuing high unemployment problem. Even though France will provide significant additional funding as ITER host, no official characterized financing as a major impediment. All but the president of the National Academy of Sciences were eager to see the project proceed forthwith. The French negotiator is pleased the U.S. seeks to bring India into the ITER partnership and urges that India be admitted as soon as practicable. End Comment.
STAPLETON